

American Education and the Jewish Day School

by Rabbi Jack J. Cohen

Rabbi, The Society for the
Advancement of Judaism,
New York City

I HAVE been asked to consider with you the problem of the Jewish day school in the context of American education. What justification can we who believe in the common school as the backbone of our American democratic education give for the movement to establish Jewish day schools? What special contribution can such schools make to the democratic structure and spirit of American society? And what are the dangers inherent in the establishment of private schools by us Jews and other religious groups?

Conditions Giving Rise to Jewish Day Schools

We must first ask ourselves why the Jewish day school movement has attracted so many followers in recent years.

(1) It should be apparent that behind all positive developments in American Jewish life during the past two and a half decades are the shattering experience of Nazism and the exhilarating effects of Zionism.

Nazism caused many of our people to explore the vast treasures of our traditions with a feeling of respect for its

depth and integrity. In a world gone mad, Judaism shone forth with a new light that attracted to it minds once disposed to ignore it. This renewed intellectual respectability of Judaism has reached into every institution of American Jewry and has stimulated widespread interest in Jewish education on all levels. Of course, the effect of Nazism, like that of Zionism, has been ambivalent. Many of our people have fled. Here, however, we consider only those who have reacted positively to Judaism.

As part of this restoration of respect for the tradition, some of our American Jews began to think in terms of a more intensive type of education than that afforded in the afternoon weekday religious school.

Similarly, this same interest in more intensive Jewish education spread among those Jews whose Zionist convictions enabled them to see how pale American Judaism looked alongside the richly colored Hebrew culture evolving in *Eretz Yisrael*. They too, therefore, have looked to the day school as an answer.

(2) In this age of psychologically oriented parents and educators, much

has been made of the sense of security which a child has when his roots are culturally deep. This awareness, alongside the alienation which Jews feel in a world which has not yet fully accepted us, has opened the thinking of many Jews to the desirability of giving their children the firm foundation which the day school is presumably best able to build.

(3) The abandonment of the old melting-pot approach to Americanization in favor of religio-cultural pluralism has provided a more hospitable setting for the acceptance of the day school idea.

(4) The influx of refugees from European environments in which all-Jewish schools were a normal practice supplied the major impetus for the entire day school movement. The schools thus sponsored account for most of the day schools currently in existence. It would be well for us to remember that many of our own Conservative colleagues and laymen stood unalterably opposed to these schools when they were first established.

(5) The success of the day school pioneers, particularly devoted Orthodox leaders, undoubtedly caused many of us to re-examine our thinking. When we compared the amount of Jewish knowledge acquired in the day school compared with that implanted by us in the best of our supplementary schools, we could hardly fail to be impressed by the contrast. Whatever reservations we may still have about the day school, honestly dictates that we recognize its superiority as a means of getting across a greater quantity of *Torah*.

(6) As a corollary to the previous condition, we were brought around to a positive view of the day school by our failures in the congregational school. We had gone overboard in heralding

the advent of the congregational school as an improvement over the communal *Talmud Torah*. Fitting in, as it does, with the religious orientation of American Jewry, we felt that the congregational school could do a more effective job of Jewish education. But we have become disillusioned. We fail effectively to teach Hebrew and Bible; even history is inadequately taught; and after graduating from the junior congregation, our students are as conspicuous by their absence as regular worshippers as are their parents. So we turn to the day school. Quantity, we now say, will increase the quality of Jewish education.

(7) Finally, we always cite the need for leaders. We cannot expect to produce the scholars, poets, writers, rabbis and well informed lay leadership that American Jewry needs from among the students of our supplementary educational systems. Many of our present day leaders, particularly the scholars among them, are products of a European background. Only an intensive program of studies can produce American trained men and women who will be creatively Jewish. Therefore, we say, at least a small portion of our children should have the chance to benefit from such a program.

Jewish Education and the Day School

A condition helps us to understand why certain phenomena occur. It does not necessarily help us decide whether to approve or disapprove the phenomena themselves. Thus, the fact that Nazism and Zionism have helped to stimulate the organization of day schools tells us little about the desirability of such schools. The same applies to the stimulating effect of new immigrants. The

sense of justification which stems from the conception of Americanism as encouraging religious pluralism is reassuring to sponsors of the day school idea, but this condition too is no criterion for evaluating its worth as opposed, let us say, to supplementary religious schools. From the standpoint of Jewish education itself, disregarding for the moment, its relationship to American democracy, the day school is potentially a far more effective instrument than any other system now functioning in the Jewish community. While it is true that some students learn in three hours a week what others can learn in six, this is no argument for reducing the norm for our afternoon schools to three hours. The more hours of study, given satisfactory conditions, the more learning. But while this is true, it does not follow that the day school is the only answer to the problem of Jewish leadership. In the first place, to provide for adult leadership on the day school principle, students would have to pursue their studies in a Jewish school through the college and post graduate years. This is the course followed by Orthodox Jews whose formal education begins in a Jewish nursery school and extends through Yeshiva University.

Under present circumstances, non-Orthodox Jews are hardly likely to confine their total education to Jewishly sponsored and oriented schools. On the other hand, there are many examples of men and women who, while studying in supplementary schools through their high school years, suddenly become intensely involved in Jewish studies during college and became highly proficient in their fields of interest. It is untrue that what a child masters in his early years determines his final development;

it is true that what a child fails to learn in the years prior to and including adolescence he may yet learn as an adult.

Justifying the Day School

Our concern here, however, is to try to justify the Jewish day school as an instrument of American democratic education. No Jew, I take it, would deny his obligation to American society to train his children as loyal citizens whose contribution to the American scene will flow from a profound commitment to the ideals of our country.

There is, of course, a sense in which the day school requires no justification. The Oregon case of 1925 has settled, for the time being, the right of parents to select the education of their children, the only limitation being that minimum requirements of the state sponsored curriculum be incorporated in the schooling given to them. The American system leaves room for all kinds of private educational institutions, and the day school is as legally acceptable as any of them. But we are concerned here with the wisdom and prudence of establishing day schools, not with their legality.

From the standpoint of education in a free society, private schools, the day school included, can be justified for the following reasons:

(1) Any state sponsored system of education is bound to suffer, as well as to gain, from the political forces operating on it. Private schools are, therefore, a necessary safety valve to protect the freedom of the educational process from too zealous interference by economy-minded officials, witch hunters, religious sectarians, over-progressive or over-conservative administrators and the like.

(2) Private schools are often able to initiate curricular changes and to test new techniques that the slower moving public schools adopt afterwards.

(3) The public school is unable to satisfy certain needs of limited sections of the populace. Sectarian religions and ethnic cultures can find little or no opportunity for transmitting their heritages in the public school, while children possessing special talents for music, art, the theater and the like often cannot acquire the training they seek in the average public school. These needs can sometimes be met in private supplementary schools, although frequently all-day education is provided so as to create a less distracting atmosphere for the achievement of the particular educational objective.

(4) Sometimes local conditions of large classes, poor teachers and multilingual student bodies render the public educational system so poor as to lead many parents to protect their children's future by placing them in private schools. While this negative reason is sometimes an extension of the social snobbery which motivates some parents to send their children to a "better" school, it must be expected that public education weakens its own case when it fails to adjust to the rapid pace of sociological change.

The Jewish day school, as it has already progressed, can be justified in three of the foregoing ways. On Christmas, and increasingly during the Easter season, Jewish children pay a severe price for their minority status in almost every public school. In violation of the spirit of separation, the Christian majority treats their major holidays as the equivalents of American civic festivals, thereby placing Judaism in the position of a

second class American culture. The Jewish day school is one means of our protesting such intrusions on religious liberty, just as the Catholic group was led to establish parochial schools in the last century when Protestants too facetiously identified their own interpretation of Christianity as native to Americanism.

Secondly, since the public school can not treat Judaism to the extent and with the depth which would satisfy Jews who look to their tradition for spiritual sustenance, the Jewish day school takes up the slack.

And finally, like non-Jewish parents who want their children to benefit from small classes and who, in addition, want the advantage of a bi-cultural education, the Jewish day school provides a perfect outlet.

Leaving the Battleground

In and of themselves, these three reasons would explain and legally justify the existence of Jewish day schools, but they would not suffice to make of the day school a worthwhile enterprise for American education.

In the first place, removing Jewish children from the public school because they suffer from the impact of the majority religions and their illegal encroachments on the curriculum is to retire from a battleground on which is being fought an important struggle for the mind of America. We Jews have no less an obligation than other fellow citizens to resist efforts directed at destroying complete religious liberty. And let us be perfectly aware that there are many communities in which sectarian Christianity is being taught in the public schools. For us Jews to retire from the scene would be a distinct disservice to

the future of democratic education.

Secondly, as I have already suggested, it remains to be seen whether the day school is the only, or even the best, method for insuring the transmission and the creation of a profound American Judaism. The afternoon school, summer camping, the spread of Hebrew departments in the colleges, the advance of adult education and the burgeoning possibilities for study in Israel are all in their infancy. We ought not to despair of them, even while we are cognizant of the tremendous gaps and weaknesses in the present structure of Jewish education. While we are still testing their efficacy, we cannot turn our back upon them and place all our hopes in the day school.

Thirdly, following those who choose private schools because the local public school system is inadequate is also tantamount to leaving a battleground of democracy. No one likes to have his child suffer because of oversized classes, poor facilities, multi-lingual student bodies or inadequate teaching. Yet, the answer cannot be for all parents who can afford to do so to remove their children from the public school. That would only split America into the privileged and underprivileged.

We must, then, look beyond these commonly advanced reasons in order to justify our own support for the Jewish day school. In terms of American education, I find two reasons which ought especially to commend themselves.

America from the Vantage Point of Judaism

The first is that America needs the variety which intensive cultural institutions among its minority and majority

groups can foster. It seems plausible to assume that day schools, in which American life can be examined from the perspective of a particular heritage, could add to the general spiritual wealth of our country. This assumes, of course, that the day school accepts the obligation to interpret the American heritage and the willingness to share that interpretation in the free market of ideas. As a minority group, we Jews are in a peculiarly advantageous position to develop insights into American life which will be the sharper the more they emerge from the richness of the Jewish heritage. There is room, therefore, for some of our children to be given the opportunity to see their country from the vantage point peculiar to Judaism.

We know, however, that isolating our children in order to give them an intensive Jewish education does not automatically enable them to make the contribution to American life which I have just suggested. On the contrary, the act of isolation can just as easily distort their view of America, rendering them unfit to participate in a pluralistic society, destroying their capacity to be objective about the cultural differences of their neighbors and depriving them of the ability of self-criticism.

Building Unity Out Of Cultural Diversity

If we are, therefore, to have Jewish day schools, we must justify them in a second way. They must contribute to the solution of the general problem of building national unity out of cultural diversity. How can we give concrete educational expression to the ideal of cultural pluralism and at the same time encourage free inquiry? Will not complete free-

dom of criticism, in the sphere of religion, for example, destroy religious liberty? Is not pluralism to be preserved by a policy of live and let live but not by educational concern for each other's beliefs? It is interesting, is it not, that the very men and women working to have religion included in the public school react vociferously against criticisms levelled by teachers against their religious doctrines! Yet how can we speak of full freedom of inquiry in public education unless religious doctrines and practices can be subjected to the same examination and evaluation as are all the normative concerns of man in politics, economics and sociology?

We are a long way from answering these questions, and prudence dictates that for the time being, we keep religion out of the public school. Before, however, we criticize the sectarianism of America's historical religions *vis à vis* one another, what about our own internal Jewish attitudes? Are we not guilty of the same incapacity to treat our religious differences in the spirit of democratic exchange as now prevent our common consideration with Christians of our respective traditions? We talk of the unity of the Jewish people, but we have not yet sensed that unity deeply enough to enable Orthodox, Reform, Conservative and secularist Jews to establish and maintain a common system of Jewish schools. I contend that Jewish day schools which are to be justified in terms of the needs of American education can be so justified only if they reckon with the internal problems of the Jewish tradition in the same spirit of freedom with which we expect common American education to treat all aspects of human experience. We should have no ideological requirements for teachers.

Only their competence as scholars and teachers and their understanding and respect for free inquiry should guide us in their selection. Jewish schools, particularly on the lower levels, ought not to be organizationally oriented as a result of their sponsorship by one movement or another. Wherever possible, they ought to be established under community-wide sponsorship.

In other words, for us to embark now on a Conservative counterpart to the Orthodox day school movement would be to hamper our efforts to relate our educational philosophy with that of the broad stream of American education. Our children must learn to see their Jewish tradition in all its breadth, just as they must study their American heritage from more than a Republican or Democratic vantage point or from that of the North or the South. We cannot, of course, force anyone to sponsor schools with us if they have no desire to do so, but let us not, as we embark on a campaign for Jewish day schools, manufacture yet another institution for capturing young minds for our preconceived notions about Jewish life. By training them as sectarian Jews, we hide from them the treasures of human understanding that are available only to open minds.

The Jewish day school can thus enrich American education by showing how it is possible for religious differences to be honestly considered without destroying the mutual respect of students for one another and without weakening their commitment to their common background. It is in this spirit, I hope, that we can embark on our own program.

Some Dangers Confronting Us

The dangers confronting us, however, are manifold and are real enough to

keep us eternally vigilant. I list here only a few.

(1) Our day schools must be open to the inspection and criticism of non-Jewish educators. Let us be alert to any proneness on our part to overlook aspects of general education which may weaken our purpose of training fine citizens of our country.

(2) We must not concentrate on the day school to the exclusion of the other, more central institutions of Jewish education. For us it must not be a case of establishing a qualitative hierarchy. Jewish leaders need not necessarily stem from day school backgrounds; nor must we expect that every day school student will end up as a Jewish leader. We need many skills in Jewish life, many of which no day school can develop.

(3) As the schools proliferate in number, financial problems will increase which must not be solved by involving Jews in appeals for state funds. We

have to be prepared to foot our own bills, and we are best advised to do so on a community-wide basis, so that schools do not mushroom every time some educator or rabbi decides he would like to have a school of his own.

(4) The danger of expecting too much can destroy the morale of supporters of the day school. The United States is not Israel. Our children, even the day school products, must mature in a non-Jewish, non-Hebraic environment. We cannot and should not shelter them from outside contact. They must be subject to all the give-and-take of a mobile society. For it is to that society and not only to Jewish life that they must contribute.

If we are alert to these dangers, and if we can approach the organization of day schools in a spirit of genuine dedication to the cause of democratic education, we can in good conscience proceed with our work.

Developing a General Studies Program

by *David A. Horowitz*

*Associate Superintendent of Schools,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

A DISCUSSION of a general studies program, particularly from the point of view of its application to a Jewish all-day school, can be developed in many ways. First, I find it necessary to define what the term "general studies" means to me, so that all of us here can be brought together in our thinking and can understand as closely as possible the issues and concepts which I propose to

place before you. The general studies are the non-specialized, fundamental branches of learning, selected, organized, planned and taught to all children. The objective of teaching the general studies is to develop children to their fullest and most socially acceptable capacities in consonance with democratic American values.